

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 235 - This Trial... He had already passed it.

With his Spirit Body deployed, Jake was now able to spot the closest life forms and adapt accordingly. It was far from perfect, but it was incomparable to the previous situation. He was no more afraid of sea creatures than he was of land creatures. What he really feared was the unknown and the feeling of powerlessness. With this new asset in hand, he could now gather information in advance and orient himself.

Sadly, he didn't yet master any mental techniques. There must have been all sorts of skills using the Spirit Body or his Aether to analyze his environment, but they were out of his reach.

Jake had memorized all the Aether runes in the manual, but most of them were useless without being connected to the others. Like the letters of the alphabet, more were needed to form words and then sentences. Some runes had powerful effects by their mere existence, but they were of no use in his present situation and would instead cost him a lot of energy and effort.

Now that he could detect the creatures within a radius of six meters, he had regained his motivation and coolness, and it was with no hesitation that he dived back underwater towards the abyss. He already dared to take the risk when he could see nothing, so with the equivalent of a radar he was completely relaxed.

Now able to avoid the most obvious traps, he went around the schools of relatively static jellyfish on his way, and hit the gills or eyes of the

fish that came to tickle him a little too closely. When a shark, whale, or other giant marine reptile approached him too narrowly, he was now able to react.

Tragically, the return to reality was abrupt. Narrowly avoiding a shark or squid that was a bit too curious was doable, once or twice, but when the whole ocean seemed to want its life, it was a different matter.

A huge crocodile-like jaw suddenly appeared in front of him at a depth of more than 300 meters, the marine predator to which it belonged being so fast that he couldn't do anything. The Aether mass had popped up in its field of detection, which was only 6 meters at the speed of a racing car, and had nonchalantly engulfed him in a gulp, burping a few bubbles before continuing on its way.

GASP!

SPLASH!

After that, Jake tried to reach the ocean floor countless times, being eaten, poisoned or electrocuted so many times that he began to become seriously indifferent to the traumatic deaths.

The most common deaths were when he was caught by a marine predator too fast and monstrous to react or defend himself. With his Spirit Body he could more or less estimate from the shape of their Aether what these underwater creatures looked like and it was clear that the fauna in this ocean was nonsensical.

There were of course fish, sharks and cetaceans like dolphins and whales, but their evolution had twisted their appearance into something grotesque, each one of them being able to hold the headliner of a horror movie.

The saying that a book couldn't be judged by its cover was totally wrong when it came to these creatures. Even the most insignificant fish were aggressive and carnivorous, not hesitating to charge or bite him, even when he whacked one of their fellow creatures to death with a single slap.

The only way he had found to defend himself from these schools of carnivorous fish was to methodically repel them with his telekinesis, but this had the effect of mentally exhausting him. The deeper he swam, the greater the pressure on his body and the more his oxygen reserves dwindled.

Having to concentrate in this way to fend off this small fry hastened his loss of oxygen, thus ruining his chances of reaching the bottom.

Another solution he eventually found was to approach the lonely sea monsters in these waters on his own. Not all of these monsters were hungry, some were even static in the water as if they were sleeping. If he did not provoke them, he could swim by them, which would cause these small carnivorous fish to let go. It was a game of trial and error, but slowly but surely he was making his way through.

He had repeatedly wondered how these sharks, crocodiles, mosasaurs, plesiosaurs and other monsters resembling nothing known could live quietly in the midst of all these pirhanas capable of crushing his bones with a single bite, and he had quickly discovered the reason after a few forced skirmishes.

Aii ovulu luf qmrlouzl, ukhuno dmz lqfii dalv, buiiwdalv, lypat, mhomnpl frt movuz arsuzougzfoul, vft lcar hmsuzut jaov f ovahe nzmouhoasu ifwuz fl vfzt fl zmhc. Tvulu dalv juzu prfgiu om msuzhmqu ovulu tudurlul frt jmpit arlouft luzsu fl f lrfhc dmz ovulu eafro nzutfomzl ad ovuw juzu omm arlalouro.

This did not mean though that octopus and squid were vulnerable prey. Jake had paid the price at his own expense. The skin of these invertebrates was so rubbery that even the sharpest teeth left only slight marks on their spongy bodies.

Jake didn't know what these fish ate to survive, but it was clear that humans had a respectable place on their menu. At least half of his deaths were due to these schools of fish.

The second most common type of death were of course these giant predators, such as megalodons or marine dinosaurs. The third most frequent type of death came from these bizarre marine creatures or invertebrates with mysterious capacities from which it was generally impossible to defend oneself.

The 'plastic bag' was one of these life forms, jellyfish and squid being other examples. Jake met them every time he managed to reach the great depths, where the sunlight had practically no more hold.

Jellyfish and plastic bags were not too hard to avoid. Their mobility was limited, but he wasted time going around them, which led him to make mistakes that often led to his loss.

Deeper down, however, when the squid and incomprehensible monsters became legion beyond 1,000 meters, Jake truly began to lose hope. There were no signs that he was close to the bottom and his unexpected appearance attracted the curiosity of the deep-sea fish.

Luminescent eels, translucent fish with sharp, poisonous fangs, ogre fish, coalacanth, angler fish, electric moray eels and a few titanic monsters swarmed at these depths, and each death he endured was more incomprehensible and nightmarish than the last.

Untiringly, Jake pushed his limits, learning from these creatures with his outstanding intelligence to learn how to counteract and neutralize

them. Sometimes he suffered a horrible death, but the next time he would advance a few meters and regain his resolve.

Finally, after so many attempts that he had lost count, Jake's hand touched the ocean floor for the first time. The pressure was insane and it was pitch black at that depth. Without his sturdy body and his Stone Skin skill, he would have been reduced to bone and flesh a long time ago.

Tvu fgwll jfl laiuro frt ovu jfouz loferfro, fiqmlo jfzq. Tvu nifhu jfl qmzgat frt hmrdplare frt wuo ad Jfcu hmpit gpzlo mpo ifpevare, vu jmpit vfsu. Urdmzoprfoiwiw, val hmqnzullut iprel juzu gpzrare dzmq ifhc md mkweur frt vu jfl taxxw.

With time running out, Jake hurried to activate his Earth manipulation skill and when he did, the smirk on his face turned into a ugly rictus. Soon after, he exhausted his oxygen and drowned to death at a depth of over 1000 meters.

GASP!

SPLASH!

The Jake who emerged on the surface of the water after yet another resurrection looked austere and glassy-eyed. Hope had completely disappeared from his eyes for good.

Whatever he tried was doomed to fail. His Aether of Intelligence, Perception and Extrasensory Perception had reached 165 points, while his Spirit Body had reached level 4, but it was precisely for this reason that he knew it was a lost cause.

He could once again extend his consciousness over ten meters without any particular effort and no migraine had assailed his skull for several hours. He was smarter than ever, and these troubled waters full of

danger no longer intimidated him. Had he been in his own pool at home, he would probably have been just as relaxed.

And yet, despite this dazzling progress, there was no joy left in him.

By the time Jake had reached the bottom of the sea, he had discovered the sad truth: There was no ground to manipulate. No sand, no dust, no gravel, no rocks. Just a huge, totally indestructible block of alien metal covering the ocean floor as far as the eye could see.

He had swum a few hundred more meters before he drowned to make sure he wasn't just unlucky and in the wrong place, but he had to face the facts. Maybe this block of metal had a limit, but he didn't feel like checking it anymore.

Because of his depression and mental exhaustion he didn't realise that he had let himself be influenced by his Myrtharian mindset. Faced with the challenge of touching the bottom of the ocean, he had devoted all his efforts to it and upon discovering that it was all in vain, he was now feeling a little empty.

But the reality he was not yet aware of was that the depth separating the surface of the ocean floor was actually... greater than the distance between his current position and the shoreline! This trial... he had already passed it. Multiple times.